

## AAOHN Offers Tips to Help Employers Weather the Flu Season

American Association of Occupational Health Nurses

The 2004-2005 influenza season could begin as early as this month, and with flu vaccine in significantly short supply, many employers are not able to offer flu shots to their workforce. To help keep employees healthy, the American Association of Occupational Health Nurses (AAOHN) encourages employers to shift the focus of their employee flu-immunization efforts towards educating employees about smart and healthy behaviors that could help them avoid the flu this season.

On average each year in the United States, from five percent to 20 percent of the population will contract the flu, according to the Centers for Disease Control. With cases of the flu likely to be on the rise during the 2004-05 influenza season due to vaccine shortage, the economic impact on businesses could be significant. The annual costs of unscheduled employee absences, due to factors including illness, can range from \$60,000 to well over \$1 million depending on company size, according to the 2004 CCH Unscheduled Absence Survey.

"The business community was caught off guard with the recent announcement about this year's dramatically limited vaccine supply, and could face operational challenges related to unscheduled employee absences because of illness," said AAOHN president Susan A. Randolph, MSN, RN, COHN-S. "The best way to mitigate these challenges will be for employers to now focus on educating employees about healthy behaviors that can help them avoid contracting influenza or to react appropriately should they become ill."

Using current best practices from expert resources, as well as AAOHN members, the association encourages employers to share the following information about healthy behaviors with employees:

- **Practice good respiratory hygiene -- A primary way the flu spreads from person to person is via coughs and sneezes. Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. If you don't have a tissue, cough or sneeze into your upper sleeve, not your hands.**
- **Keep your hands clean -- Be vigilant about washing your hands often during the day. Wash hands with soap and warm water for at least 15 to 20 seconds. When soap isn't available, you can use alcohol based hand wipes or gel hand sanitizers as a substitute.**

- **Eat, drink and be healthy** -- Maintain a well-balanced diet and be sure to drink plenty of fluids, especially water. Enhance the beneficial effects of a healthy diet by increasing your Vitamin C intake.
- **Don't stress out** -- If your stress levels are high, your body is more susceptible to illness. To combat stress, get plenty of rest and try to exercise regularly. Additionally, make an effort to step outside for some fresh air during your already scheduled daily work breaks.
- **Learn how to recognize the flu** -- It's important to recognize the difference between the flu and other common ailments. Symptoms of the flu include a high fever; head and muscle aches; extreme fatigue; dry cough and sore throat; runny or stuffy nose and gastro-intestinal symptoms.
- **Finally, if you get the flu, stay home** -- If you do wind up contracting the flu despite preventative measures, don't put your co-workers at risk. Stay home.

### **Hand Hygiene Not Up to Snuff**

The CDC says frequent handwashing is one of the best ways to prevent the spread of infectious diseases. SDA's 2004 Clean Hands Report Card gave Americans a "C" for hand hygiene, based on survey results that found:

- 43 percent surveyed seldom or never wash their hands after coughing or sneezing.
- 32 percent don't always wash before eating lunch.
- 54 percent of respondents don't wash their hands long enough to effectively remove germs and dislodge dirt.

### **Coming Clean at the Office**

A 2002 study conducted by University of Arizona researchers found that the workplace does indeed host its share of germs: Phones have up to 25,127 germs per square inch, keyboards 3,295 per square inch and computer mice 1,676 per square inch. Mindful of this fact, SDA offers employers and employees several tips to help keep healthy at work:

#### **Hands-On Tips for Employees:**

- Routinely wash your hands with soap as soon as you arrive at the office and several times throughout the day, including before and after lunch, after using the restroom, and in between meetings. Wash your hands vigorously for at least 20 seconds.
- Because germs can be transmitted from virtually anything you come in contact with, keep a surface cleaner or disinfecting spray or wipes handy for daily wipe-down of the two most common items you touch each day, your desktop and telephone. Some products are designed to kill the germs that lead to cold and flu suffering --- read the product label to be sure.
- Clean your office and restroom doorknobs regularly. Wipes are great for this task.
- Use a disinfectant spray in your office garbage can. Has it ever been disinfected?
- Subway, bus or train commuters should carry (and use) a hand sanitizer or antibacterial hand wipes following their commutes. This can prevent germ transmission when you stop to get your morning coffee or breakfast.
- If you're sick, stay home!

### **2004 Flu Season Research Findings**

The following questions were asked of 1013 American adults (504 men and 509 women). The independent consumer research study was completed in August 2004, on behalf of The Soap and Detergent Association (SDA), by International Communications Research (ICR). The survey has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.1 percent.

Do you ever clean or wipe off your office/workplace desk before eating there?

Results:

- Yes (47%)
- No (46%)

### **Insight:**

- While nearly half of all Americans do not clean the space where they eat, there is a difference in the habits of men and women. Fifty-seven percent of men DO NOT clean their desks and 57 percent of women DO report to clean their desks before eating there.

How often do you wash your hands before eating lunch? Results:

- Always (68%)
- Frequently (20%)
- Seldom (9%)
- Never (2%)
- Don't know (1%)

**Insight:**

- You really should wash your hands before lunch, because many of the surfaces you touch -- such as keyboards, door handles, and elevator buttons -- can harbor germs that can make you sick.

Approximately how many times do you wash your hands on an average day?

- 1-2 times (2%)
- 3-4 times (12%)
- 5-6 times (23%)
- 7-10 times (24%)
- More than 10 times (36%)
- I don't wash my hands (.1%)
- Don't know (2%)

**Insight:**

- When asked how often they washed their hands on an average day, there was a notable gender gap in the frequency of keeping clean. Most women who responded washed more than 10 times a day (48%), while the top number for men was 5-6 times a day (29%).

How often do you wash your hands after you cough or sneeze?

- Always (23%)
- Frequently (32%)
- Seldom (31%)
- Never (12%)
- Don't know (1%)

**Insight:**

- 43 percent of Americans seldom or never wash their hands after they cough or sneeze.

**Help prevent the spread of Colds and flu.**

**Please Wash Your Hands Frequently**